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## NOTES AND COMMENTS.

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### CAN LYING BE JUSTIFIED?

As a matter of cold-blooded ethics, should the truth be proclaimed at the price of life, liberty, and reputation? As a matter of cold-blooded ethics, should the young so be taught, and their elders so set the example?

While all moral advancement of a people must rest upon a proper standard of truth in their intercourse with each other, yet this question has not been squarely met, for even the most truth-loving evade the issue. If the principles of truth *could* be so thoroughly instilled into a race, or a nation, or a generation, that it would be a daily spectacle to see fathers testifying against their children, and children against their parents, and friends against their dearest friends, although their lives, liberties, and reputations were at stake, simply because they were telling the truth, would it be a desirable condition of affairs?

Is there not something in the nature of man that revolts against the spectacle of seeing another jeopardize the life, liberty, or reputation of one he should protect, no matter how much he is a lover of truth? In real life we know absolutely that this law of man's nature has been so well met that it is now conceded in our courts that a wife is not compelled to testify against a husband, nor a husband against a wife, nor is the prisoner at the bar compelled to testify against himself. He is not required to be put to this test of whether he will tell the truth against himself or take refuge in the protection to be found in swearing falsely.

But in daily life this question is not so easily answered: we evade it, and so push away the sense of responsibility we ought to meet. No man, no woman, knows but that some day he or she may be brought face to face with this problem. How to meet it is the question. Have we the right to so answer that the life, liberty, or reputation of a loved one, or a friendless one, or a fugitive who looks to us for protection, shall be taken away, simply that the cold-blooded edicts of truth shall be satisfied? Or is the truth in such a case to be held up aloft in the face of every vicissitude and at every sacrifice?

The literature of a people reflects the ethics of the mind and sentiments common and prevailing among that people, for there the moral purpose and standard should prevail, if anywhere. But upon this subject there is a conflict in our literature. The question is not answered. In the Old Testament the story is told of Rahab, a woman of no character, who concealed the spies of Israel in her house, and, when questioned, swore that they were not there. For this lie she was rewarded. After the destruction of the place she and her

family were protected, and the name of Rahab was handed down to be honored as long as the tribes of Israel should exist. In the New Testament, Ananias and Sapphira swore falsely to save their reputations, and were struck dead.

Walter Scott, in his novel "The Heart of Mid-Lothian," met the question fairly and squarely in the case of Jeanie Deans. Her sister was on trial for her life, suspected of infanticide, though it could not be absolutely proved. Jeanie Deans was called on to testify whether her sister had ever talked to her upon the subject of the coming of the child, or whether she had been seen making any preparation for its reception such as mothers make, which questions, answered in the affirmative, would establish a degree of proof of innocence. The old father stood anxiously awaiting each word, and then turned to Jeanie, not doubting that she would say "Yes," even if it were not true, since her sister's life hung upon her answer. But poor Jeanie burst into tears and replied, "No"; and her sister was sentenced in consequence.

Victor Hugo has met the question fairly and squarely also, but from a point directly opposite. In his masterpiece of "Les Misérables" he presents the picture of the degraded galley-slave, who has robbed the good bishop of his silver plates, and, being captured, is brought back to be confronted by the bishop. The wretch knows that this means the galleys for life, but to his surprise the good bishop says: "Oh! I presented him with these plates. I have been waiting for you to return—you forgot to take the candlesticks also—they are solid silver and will bring you quite a sum." As a result of this lie, the convict becomes an honored man, but the police are still on his trail, and about to take him, when he escapes by means of a room where sits a Sister of Mercy, who tells the police an untruth—she says he did not pass that way. And upon these two lies, one of a bishop, the other of a Sister of Mercy, hangs the character of Jean Valjean, one of the greatest in literature.

In the play of the "Two Orphans," a popular melodrama for the past sixteen years, the persecuted Henriette is sentenced to a convict colony in Cayenne. As the officer enters the prison to point out the convicts who are to be shipped away, a Sister of Mercy enables her to escape by the simple act of nodding "No" as he points to Henriette. And as an evidence of popular feeling on this subject there is always a great burst of applause at this point—applause for the lie which gives Henriette her freedom.

In the day of slavery, in pursuance of the system of what was called "The Underground Railway," each truthful answer to the slave-drivers in search of their victims resulted in the capture of the hapless fugitive, and the condemning of him again to the lash of slavery. Question: Was the truth commendable under such circumstances? and should the youth of our land be so taught?

There is a well-known story of a daughter of Revolutionary times who hid a prisoner of war under the linen she was bleaching, and allowed the pursuing British to think he had passed on, and thus saved his life. The fact that she equivocated with the truth has no bearing on the question. A lie with the lips and a lie by silence each has the same intent to deceive. Practically there is no difference, for it often happens that half a truth, unmodified, is a lie. The question is, "Was she justified, or should her course be condemned? Was it heroic, or was it wrong?"

A popular saying which bears on this subject has sprung into existence, and, showing its popularity, has travelled to the western coast of America from England in the last few years. It serves as a moral standard regarding truth being spoken at the price of reputation. The Prince of Wales was

called upon to testify against a woman's character, and a feeling of respect is aroused by the commendation "that he perjured himself like a gentleman"!

Is there a higher law than the law? Is there an ethical point beyond pure ethics, that human nature feels intuitively this peculiar sense of heroism in telling what is not strictly true in order to save life, liberty, and reputation? Or is life a small thing, and liberty a small thing, and reputation a small thing to place beside the truth?

Ought all things, even a mother's love, and a wife's devotion, and a sister's honor, to be sacrificed to preserve the truth intact?

ELLA STERLING CUMMINS.

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### TO WOMEN NOT DUMB.

FROM the very nature of her life, interests, social up-bringing, and social atmosphere, woman is the sex that everlastingly shows the least moral and intellectual responsibility about the use of language. It sometimes seems as if any conscience or understanding of the value of words, and of what a phrase means or does not mean, is not to be found in the sex. A word is a short cut to expressing an idea. Women dash for it involuntarily, with as little premeditation as they dart through the first gap in the hedge, with flying skirts, if a red cow looks at them attentively in crossing the field. Men have to consider consequences in words and sentences; men have to reflect, even in a twinkling, that *yea* is *yea* and *nay* is *nay*, and that a blow from the shoulder or the payment of a check is a material consequence of what and how a thing is talked over with somebody else.

But woman, incorrigible, heedless, talky, injudicious, and indiscriminate woman! what shall be done with you?—you irritating, delightful, perfectly irresponsible creature in your use of adjectives and qualifying clauses, whether you are describing how you missed a train, or enjoyed a ball, or saw a street fight! Have you no conscience in your picturesque loquacity? Do you wish to go on exaggerating, *ly*—yes, lying, misrepresenting facts, in your charming desire to tell your own story in your own way? Will no god of accuracy cry, "Hold, enough," and stop you in your mad career, and either at one fell swoop reduce your vocabulary to one of laconic sort or else enlighten you as to the truth that words are the great disguisers of what we have known and seen and felt?

O women! you who are not dumb, nor (if you can possibly help it) taciturn and reticent, miserly of talk! refer the question back to fundamental principles. If you have really, at the bottom of your heart, the wish to do things honestly, correctly, no matter how trivial the things be, and because truth is lovely, do, for pity's sake, speak accurately, use good English and just phrases. It is so easy, so *very* easy, if you will only think about words and remember that words are ideas, and that one cannot lay aside brains and common-sense with any excuse when talking begins. You cannot push away influence in a sentence's course. You are morally a surety for a story's being told truthfully as to every adjective, accurately as to each phrase, with reasonable precision as to every clause, and in sentences that, furthermore, will bear all the grammatical tests that education in your youth should enable them to sustain.

Now, this does not mean the precisian's and purist's way. It does not kill colloquialism. It means merely thinking a little of *how* you are expressing yourself, and of how honestly you are conveying your facts. Opin-